Essays

In/distinction

Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's 'A photographic conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp'

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As the 'abbreviation that telescopes history into a moment',[1] photography 'is always related to something other than itself.'[2] But rather than being material evidences that speak for themselves, photographs are more like 'silent witnesses' in relation to this 'other', and to the reality that defines the context of their production and reception.[3] Through listening to various voices and stories around and about images, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's *A Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp* (2001-present) – a multi-layered project developed over the time span of more than 10 years – is trying to get photographs 'to speak' about this reality, in this case that of Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in the South of Lebanon. Combining archival, historical, and anthropological practices, as well as a variety of artistic forms of expression –

from publications and curated exhibitions with a group of adolescents to Eid-Sabbagh's most recent performances and lectures that include a sporadic display of videos and historical photographs[4] – this project is primarily a tribute to the individual, in that it is the individual's actions and convictions that contribute to the formation of a meaningful community. At the same time, it examines socio-political circumstances and dynamics while cherishing intimacy and personal recollections.
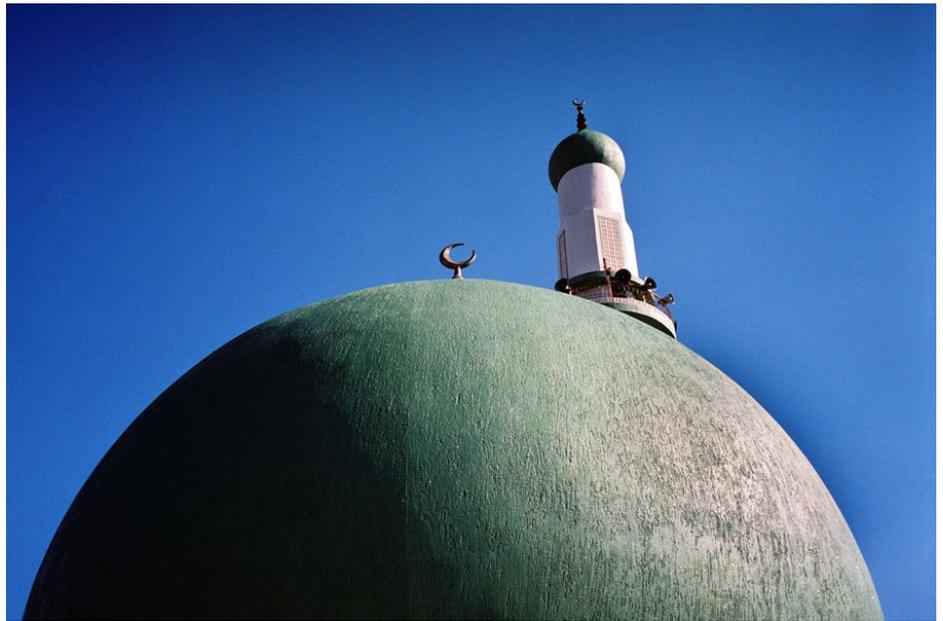
The mosque, March 2005, August 2006 and April 2009, Ali al-Ali.
Courtesy Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

This essay takes some of Eid-Sabbagh's methods and the different visual elements she combines into closer consideration. However, as it is still ongoing, *A Photographic Conversation* does not yet allow for any comprehensive critique or premature conclusion. Nevertheless, the work in progress so far offers at this point many interesting perspectives not only on the history of the Burj al-Shamali camp and the current situation of the people living there, but also on photography that documents this place of habitation – its rhetoric and different modes of representation.

Located 3 kilometres east of the city of Tyre (Sour), Burj al-Shamali was established after the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948 to accommodate thousands of refugees, who were forced to leave Palestine following the creation of the State of Israel (referred to as Nakba). The camp's purpose was to provide refugees with immediate humanitarian relief. Yet, after more than sixty years, Palestinians were never granted their right of return, and are often regarded by Lebanon as a national security threat.[5] Most of them still live in temporary shelters or refugee camps, which, with time, became concrete and institutionalized 'zones of in-distinction', in which, according to Giorgio Agamben 'fact and law coincide'.[6] These zones are created through the establishment of a constant state of exception: a suspension of the juridical order symbolizing and fixing the border between bare life and political existence.[7] Simultaneously, the camps became 'oppositional spaces appropriated and endowed with alternative meanings'[8] and 'a potent political field in which to organize and express national identity and sentiment.'[9]

Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, *A photographic conversation from Burj-al-Shamali – work in progress, part two.* Performance at Les Halles des Schaerbeek, Brussels, December 2012.
Photographs Rozenn Quere. Courtesy Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

The situation for Burj al-Shamali's residents is highly precarious. Deprived of their basic rights, they are not allowed to perform seventy-two professions, among them medicine, law and engineering. They are also denied the right to own private property. They do not have access to the Lebanese health care system and are limited in their freedom of movement within and out of Lebanon.[10] The unemployment rate in the camp is at approximately 65 percent among men and 90 percent among women. Houses are in desolate conditions, having mostly zinc roofs that leak during winter and are excessively hot during summer. The continuous water shortages and electricity cuts, though not unusual in Lebanon, are particularly long and frequent in the camp.[11]

A Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali tackles these issues, beginning with the trauma caused by the Nakba itself, moving on to the current living conditions and political views of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Eid-Sabbagh looks at how three generations of camp inhabitants have been affected by the consequences of the Nakba and a history to which they relate differently based on different sets of memories, experiences and expectations. Through investigating the historical narrative that holds these three generations together, and the ways it is conveyed through images and stories around them, Eid-Sabbagh debates how this narrative determines collective and individual identity inside the camp.

A Photographic Conversation thus lends its inhabitants a voice that describes the 'zone of distinction'. Eid-Sabbagh reminds us as viewers, listeners, readers and participants, of our responsibility to regard this camp not only as a symbolic presence that recalls a historical event or the manifestation of a collective trauma, but rather as the real space that it is, namely one that is shifting, unstable and contingent, like the identities and memories it is supposed to affirm. In doing so, she primarily addresses the role of photography and the

capacities it has in the creation of a collective narrative on the camp and its residents, taking into consideration that the refugees' 'current identity is built largely on an abstract notion that is solely transmitted orally from a generation to the next.'[12]

This process of oral transmission of history leads to an identity affirmation that is mainly based on ideas of imaginative investment, projection, and creation and, according to Marianne Hirsch, is defined by the fact that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. 'But', as Hirsch notes: '…these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.'[13] In this context, Hirsch credits photography the ability 'to solidify the tenuous bonds that are shaped by need, desire, and narrative projection.'[14]

Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, *A photographic conversation from Burj-al-Shamali – work in progress, part two.* Performance at Les Halles des Schaerbeek, Brussels, December 2012.
Photographs Rozenn Quere. Courtesy Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

Over the years, Eid-Sabbagh gathered a digital collection of more than 2,000 studio and family photographs spanning from 1947 to 1990 and approximately 10,000 photographs produced by adolescents she worked with. She has also amassed over 40 hours of video footage, consisting mainly of interviews with camp inhabitants talking about their individual relationships to personal photographs and photography.

The historical family and studio photographs provide indications for the interpretation of contemporary representations of Palestinian society in general, and that of the camp in particular. Most of the families in Burj al-Shamali are originally from rural areas. As they were expelled from their villages in Palestine, many possessed only one or two photographs – if any at all – from before 1948, which they took with them when they fled. This scarcity of photographs in Burj al-Shamali persisted till the 1970s. Although becoming more present in the following years and widely cherished as souvenirs, photographs are until today often regarded as controversial in the camp, as their realistic likeness might stand in conflict with its inhabitant's faith. In Burj al-Shamali, photographs are normally not displayed publicly, but are more likely to be kept in bags or boxes, hidden away. The only photographs of people hanging visible in houses are portraits of deceased relatives.

In *A photographic conversation* and especially in Eid-Sabbagh's performances, which she herself refers to as 'storytelling′, there is a reflection on the ambivalent relationship the camp inhabitants have to photography. Her performances, like those on the occasions of the 1st Qalandiya International festival in Ramallah (2012) and the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale (2011), take place in relatively small spaces with limited access. She temporarily projects images and videos, telling the spectators about the camp, its history, the people living there, and her own experiences of the place and its inhabitants. Through the situational reality that Eid-Sabbagh creates through

these encounters, the constant shift between visibility and absence of images is highlighted: the photograph as a memento becomes – like the instant it was taken – ephemeral again. The narrative elements she presents within her performances are a derivate of the acquaintances she made and the stories she heard in Burj al-Shamali. These stories add up to the collective narrative of the camp and include, for example, the account of a studio photographer talking about his work and clients and how they liked to be perceived in portraits. There is Hasna Abou Kharoub – a key figure in the project since she also took and collected photographs not only as memorabilia with sentimental value, but also as valuable historical documents – or a man who asked Eid-Sabbagh to publish the pictures of his wife before and after the Israeli army attacked Burj al-Shamali with napalm gas in 1982.

Setting of lecture performance, *(re)collecting images*, at Gestures in Time: the 4th Riwaq Biennale and Jerusalem Show VI for the 1st Qalandiya International, Abwein, November 2012.
Photograph Andreas Thal. Courtesy Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

Eid-Sabbagh came to Burj al-Shamali for the first time in the summer of 2001. At the time a student with a specific interest in the recent history of the Middle East, she initiated a series[15] of interventions in six of the 12 official Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon,[16] and employed a method widely known as participatory photography,[17] working with groups of children and adolescents for a few days in each camp. The general concept of participatory photography is to provide marginalized members of a society with cameras to ideally empower them to raise a critical consciousness on their often precarious living conditions, to actively participate in a socio-political discourse, of which they as individuals are often excluded. In that sense, participatory photography proposes a valuable alternative to the stereotypical representations of suffering in photojournalism, delivering seemingly authentic images unfiltered through the international media credentials calling for immediate agency. The democratic aspect of this approach is at stack, though, if the facilitators of participatory photography projects abuse their own power. They are in control of the participant's images and testimonies, as it is eventually up to them to edit, publish and contextualize the images produced.[18]

Consequently, for Eid-Sabbagh it was crucial that, after developing the films, she would look at and discuss the photographs together with the children who took them. Doing so, it occurred to her that they had often handled the cameras sincerely as a medium of documentation, clearly understanding its potentials to represent and highlight the particular living conditions in the camps. In this regard, the whole 'photographic conversation' began with the desire to understand how the children and adolescents in the camps developed their sense for photography. It turned out that the youth Eid-Sabbagh encountered were already familiar with the method of participatory photography. They had already been 'sensitized' through other people working with them, in terms of how to utilize the camera to best suit their needs: namely, to raise awareness on the

situation of Palestinian refugees and their cause. Realizing the limitations of this approach and the moral consequences that came with its exploitative aspects, Eid-Sabbagh felt the need to re-evaluate participatory photography and its principles, questioning its ambition of gaining access to a social realm without any actual, evocative exchange taking place.[19] Still interested in the method's capacity to generate a process of collective creativity by simultaneously encouraging individual forms of expression, she decided to return to Lebanon in 2005, and lived in Burj al-Shamali for most of the following four years.

Convinced that only a sustainable, durable, and direct interaction – one that demanded commitment from all parties involved – could give the practice of participatory photography a purposeful meaning, Eid-Sabbagh began to work more closely with the group of girls and boys she had gotten to know in 2001, who back then were between eleven and fifteen years old. After establishing a workspace in the camp, she involved them in a continuous, long-term dialogue mediated through photography, one that gave sight and voice to their personal preferences, concerns and eagerness, triggering a collective creative process, during which each group member developed his or her own visual language and main area of interest. Consequently, the group arrived at a point where they were ready to expose the results of their work to a larger audience. The exhibition *How Beautiful is Panama!* was presented in 2008 as the first incarnation of *A photographic conversation*[20] including, for example, the series of portraits Fatmeh Soleiman took of her friends in the pose of the comic icon Handala, turning their back towards the camera facing the walls confine the camp; Ali al-Ali's documentation of the construction of a mosque inside the camp; as well as Yasser Ibrahim's portraits of Burj al-Shamali's inhabitants who experienced the Nakba.

Created over nine years, this part of Eid-Sabbagh's photographic conversation provides a complex image of adolescence and coming of age, one confronted with a fate inevitably restricted by the socio-political parameters of the camp and the status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Fatmeh Soleiman, *Racha Moussa Mohammad (Saadnayel, 1987).*
A series, 2007-2008.
Courtesy Yasime Eid-Sabbagh.

Throughout her stay in the camp, Eid-Sabbagh lived with a family that regarded and treated her as a fully-fledged member. This family also helped her to establish close relationships with other residents.

More importantly, she invested the time and patience that was needed to establish these relationships:

I think that time is an essential factor of this project and the whole work process. Everything that happened in the frame of this project, to myself and to other people involved, would not have been possible if we wouldn't have been so generous with our time. It is very difficult to speak about the component that time is as it is very abstract, but I think that time and the physical presence of us all together in the same space has produced something. Something that is not necessarily material; some sort of creative dynamic.[21]

In the context of the camp, itself a hermetic entity whose inhabitants are linked to each other by tight family bonds and a sense of tradition, it is rather difficult as a complete outsider to gain instant access to people's houses and even more so to their photographs and memories. With a critical point of view towards anthropological methods such as fieldwork, Eid-Sabbagh adapted herself to the patriarchal camp environment and its social conventions. Different from the ethnographer as participating observer,[22] her presence wasn't merely about gaining information with the intention to produce an output. She developed instead an alert 'sense of place', which, according to Lucy Lippard, is a 'virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy.'[23]

This process of immersion became a significant element of the entire project, and also enabled Eid-Sabbagh's in-depth research on, and the collection of, studio and family photographs from the camp community. By that time in 2007, the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) in Beirut had become an important support structure, and Eid-Sabbagh eventually became a member of the organization one year later. Although being presented under the umbrella of the AIF, the AIF never imposed any methods of research and collecting on her that would question the project's autonomy. Opposed to the AIF mission

to collect physical photographic objects like prints, negatives or glass plates to preserve cultural heritage, Eid-Sabbagh only collects digital images, which form a collection that is not part of the AIF archive. It is also different from previous projects of fellow AIF artist members in the way photography is presented as social phenomenon rather than being displayed as a form of cultural artefact. Instead of focusing on the materiality of the photograph, or its aesthetic value and persuasive indexical nature, Eid-Sabbagh is primarily interested in the variety of individual photographic modes and collective customs of representation, strategies of mediation, as well as people's desire to establish a link to the past through photography.

With her applied critique on participatory photography, her restrained display of the historical photographs she collected, and her emphasis on the circumstances of their production and reception rather than on their appearance – as well as her decision to only collect the reproduction of the photographs instead of their originals – Eid-Sabbagh not only negotiates the ambiguous nature of photography as a tool of documentation, but also questions the authority of the archive.

Her goal is not to create a static archive that functions merely as a storage device.[24] She is rather composing something that is closer to what Siegfried Kracauer called a 'memory-image' of Burj al-Shamali. A memory image is the totality of impressions, feelings, sentiments, thoughts and affections related to a person, and thus a complete and more 'genuine' image of him or her that outlasts time. Whereas Kracauer regards photographs only as insignificant fragments of time and space, or, as he puts it, 'a jumble that consists partly of garbage',[25] both entities are organized via essentially different principles:

Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory-images retain what is given only insofar as it has

significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory-images are at odds with photographic representation.[26]

Yasser Ibrahim, *Ali al-Hajj (Naameh, 1992)*. A series, 2007-2010.
Courtesy Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

Eid-Sabbagh manages to balance this disparity between photography and memory-image as she looks at the medium intertwined with the oral history of the camp.[27] If the photographs of the teenagers, by now all young adults, show

the current circumstances of the camp from individual angles, the collection of historical photographs creates a counter-image of the past. But both sets of images complement one another and merge into the frame that is shaped by the discussions and debates Eid-Sabbagh led with the camp inhabitants.

Photography in general is problematic as one 'either expects too much or not enough'[28] of it. Too much, in the sense that it is often believed to represent an objective truth or reality although it can only show a mere fragment of it; not enough, in the sense that one takes photographs for granted as historical documents, neglecting photography's phenomenology and 'very own substance.'[29] Eid-Sabbagh's *Photographic Conversation* challenges this dilemma in order to reveal and discuss discrepancies and ideological pitfalls of established historical narratives and their effects on the formation of (cultural) identity. Yet the project still manages to convey a lot of the personal fascination and obsession Eid-Sabbagh and her protagonists have for the medium. Instead of solely applying the notion that 'photography is a universal language' that 'speaks to all people',[30] she further suggests that people also speak through photography; and they do so in their very own language(s).

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[1] Eduardo Cadava, 'Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History', in: *diacritics/fall-winter 22,* 1992, p. 84–114, p. 101.

[2] Ibid., p. 100.

[3] The relationship between witnessing and photography and the importance of contextualizing photographs within the circumstances of their production play for example a crucial

aspect of Georges Didi-Huberman's argumentation in *Images In Spite of All*, Chicago, 2008.

[4] Eid-Sabbagh presented different aspects of the photographic conversation in 2010 between 2012 for example at Les Halles de Schaerbeek in Brussels, in the frame of first Qalandiya International festival in Ramallah and the third Thessaloniki Biennale as well as during the Speak and Memory symposium at Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.

[5] This is mostly related to the concern that the granting of citizenship to the Palestinian refugees, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, would upset the delicate sectarian balance in Lebanon on which its constitution and therefore balances of power are based. Related to this, the Palestinian refugees have also been blamed for the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, creating a 'state within a state'. See Jaber Suleiman *Marginalised Community: The Case of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*

[6] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 28

[7] Ibid., p.4: '[…] the state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, in so far as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept' and p. 26: 'the modern state of exception is instead an attempt to include the exception to itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide.'

[8] Julie Marie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, p. 95.

[9] Ibid., p. 94.

[10] For a through and insightful examination on the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon see: Robert P. G. Bowker, *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity, and the Search for Peace*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2003, Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries,* London, Zed Books, 1979, and Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon,* London, Zed Books, 1994.

[11] For more information on Burj al-Shamali, see for example the website of Beit Atfal Assumoud (BAS), The National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training (NISCVT): http://www.socialcare.org/Centers.aspx?id=13.

[12] This quote stems from the introductory text in a brochure that was produced by Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Simon Lourié accompanying the exhibition *How beautiful is Panama!* in 2008, p. 2. Eid-Sabbagh's assertion corresponds with Mohamed Kamel Doraï, when he lists memory and identity affirmation as one of the four principal functions of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. See Mohamed Kamel Doraï, *Les Réfugiés Palestiniens du Liban: une géographie de l'exil*, CNRS Editions, Paris, 2006.

[13] Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', in: *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008), 103-128, p. 106-107.

[14] Ibid, p.117.

[15] At the early stages of the project Eid-Sabbagh worked together with French photographer Simon Lourié.

[16] Besides the official refugee camps that are recognized and supported by UNRWA, about 15 unregistered Palestinian informal gatherings or unofficial settlements exist in Lebanon.

[17] Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris from the University of Michigan first coined the term in the mid-1990s. Eid-Sabbagh reflected critically on this approach in her Masters thesis 'De la collaboration en photographie. Approche critique de la photographie participative' at the École Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière, Paris.

[18] In her text 'The Art of Engagement', Diana Allan pinpointed this problem as follows: 'While such initiatives are often heralded as a means by which disenfranchised communities can gain access to arenas of cultural production, or raise awareness about issues affecting their communities, the conflation of agency with cultural

expression can elide the very real gap that separates theory and practice; the hard fact is that in many such grassroots art projects the work ends up in the hands of organizers rather than participants.' See Diana Allan, 'The Art of Engagement', published on the arteeast website in March 2009. Allan is the founder of the *Nakba Archive*, an online archive of recorded filmed interviews with first generation Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon about the events of 1948. Amongst those are also residents of Burj al-Shamali. See http://www.nakba-archive.org.

[19] In her thesis Eid-Sabbagh critically examines this relationship between facilitator and participants and comes to the conclusion that it is often imbalanced and far from being actually democratic. This led her to reevaluate the whole approach of participation and finally distinguishing between participatory and collaboratory projects, as which she also defines *A photographic conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp*: 'Dans un processus participatif, le photographe garde son autorité, il est auteur, il impose des choix alors que le rôle du participant reste cantonné à la prise de vue. La collaboration cherche au contraire à partager les différentes étapes de création de l'image, que ce soit la technique (dans un processus de production artisanale) ou la sémantique (dimension artistique et signification des photographies).' Quoted from Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, *De la collaboration en photographie. Approche critique de la photographie participative*, Louis-Lumière, Paris, 2005, p. 107.

[20] The exhibition was on display in 4 different Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, the Gobi Mela Photography Festival in Dakha, and the Makan House of Expression in Amman.

[21] Interview with Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, 07.03.2012.

[22] Participant observation as a research method with the aim to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a community through direct social engagement was employed as a main strategy of ethnography by Franz Boas and his followers. James Clifford later defined ethnography as 'ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation', see James Clifford, *The*

Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, p. 9.

[23] Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society,* The New Press, New York, 1998, p. 33.

[24] Eid-Sabbagh states about the project, that she 'wanted to devise a model that was long-term and premised upon handing over ownership to the protagonists of the camp community rather than NGO officials or grant-makers situated far away from the realities of the camp.' Quote from brochure produced by Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Simon Lourié accompanying the exhibition *How beautiful is Panama!* in 2008, p. 1.

[25] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography' (transl. by and Thomas Y. Levin), in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1993), pp.421-436, p.425.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Eid-Sabbagh here counters Kracauer's argument that without any oral tradition the image alone would not be sufficient to reconstruct an individual's 'identity', as it only shows the appearance or an aspect of his or her personality in a unique spatial or temporal configuration with an emphasize on its context of origin and presentation. See Kracauer, 'Photography', p.423.

[28] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images In Spite of All*, Chicago, 2008, p. 34.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Edward Steichen, 'Photography: Witness and Recorder of Humanity', in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 1958), pp. 159-167, p. 167.

About the author

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